

An interview with Carl Anthony

Race, Class & Sprawl

by Julie Quiroz

Carl Anthony is the founding director of the Urban Habitat Program, the former chair of the East Bay Conversion and Reinvestment Commission, an architect, and a former associate professor at UC Berkeley. Founded in 1989, UHP is dedicated to building a multicultural majority for urban environmental leadership, in order to create socially just, ecologically sustainable communities in the Bay Area. Julie Quiroz, former associate director of the Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights, joined UHP last year to develop a leadership training program for community leaders concerned about the intersection of race, class and urban development.

Q: Does urban sprawl threaten people of color?

A: I'd say it's both a threat and an opportunity. A threat in part because those framing the issues are not focused on social justice. Environmentalists are fighting sprawl because it destroys biodiversity. Some developers are open to limiting sprawl because they've had too many battles with suburbanites who want to preserve their open space. In some cases environmentalists and developers are coming together in an alliance that has several negative impacts on low-income people and communities of color. Economically, it's negative when developers, wanting to make more profits within the urban growth boundaries, gentrify, raise rents and displace low-income people. Culturally, it's negative when communities are redesigned and redeveloped in ways that destroy their vibrancy and history. And it's

negative to have people of color and environmentalist lining up against each other.

But the fight against sprawl also presents real opportunities. Working

to create urban growth boundaries gives us a chance to reframe the relationship between the inner city and the suburbs, and for inner cities to hold environmentalists and developers accountable for what they do at the outskirts. Growth boundaries cannot be effective without a process for deciding where develop-

ment can happen, where freeways will be built, where affordable housing will be located. Low-income and people of color communities can use this process in powerful ways.

Q: What is "smart growth"?

A: "Smart growth" acknowledges that unmanaged growth is a disaster and that cities have to grow more intelligently. Developers who accept growth limits, who are creative and align with environmentalists, are also said to be "smart." The problem is, "smart growth" hasn't been framed to involve the constituencies most negatively affected by current patterns of development and sprawl.

Still, the fact of these alliances between environmentalists and developers, and of this concept of "smart growth," presents some kind of opening. This is an opportunity for people of color to be proactive, to decide what we want our communities to be like, and how they should relate to other communities. For the first time in decades, we have a chance to do something about the urban/suburban disparity.

Q: What are the possibilities?

A: Last year we collaborated with Minnesota State Representative Myron Orfield [see "Urban Sprawl and Social Justice," Fall 1998] on a study of the Bay Area. We came up with three basic findings: 1) Poverty is deepening in the inner cities; 2) Poverty is deepening in many suburbs that lack the tax base needed to meet their growing needs; and, 3) A "privileged quarter" is receiving the lion's share of public and private investment without giving anything in return. Both inner cities and suburbs are

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losing out to the privileged quarter. Suburban communities who in the past competed with each other to get a shopping mall in order to build some kind of tax base are starting to realize that the costs — in terms of lost local business and open space, increased traffic, etc. — are just too high.

Looking at all this, we're starting to believe that an inner city/suburban alliance is possible, with tax equity as the cornerstone.

Q: *What about racism?*

A: Racism is often a more powerful influence than economic self-interest. It won't go away. But there are many new factors that are causing the white working class to reconsider its priorities. With the importance of the global economy and awareness of our ecological limits growing, we face a fundamentally new situation. This is an opportunity for people with a progressive vision to be proactive. A cross-racial alliance is not a foregone conclusion, but there is an opening.

Q: *What might tax equity look like?*

A: Right now, taxes are used in very regressive ways. We give tax breaks to corporations and pass on the costs to poor people. What we need is a way to take the tax issue away from the Right. We need a system of revenue sharing that would allow blue-collar suburbs and inner cities to increase their tax base without building shopping malls and upscale housing developments that eat up land and require cars and highways. We should look at Minnesota's tax sharing model and how it could be used as a strategy against sprawl. In Minnesota, each city contributes a percentage of its commercial property tax base growth into a resource pool. Then they divide it up among the cities, based on need. It's not a perfect system, but it's definitely making a difference.

Q: *Where's the connection with community organizing?*

A: Groups doing community organizing still don't have much of an urban planning perspective, or else they see organizing and planning in opposition. In fact, they can be complementary. Planning should support organizing.

I think organizers need to acknowledge their regional context. All of us need to realize that endless expansion is no longer possible. We no longer have unlimited natural resources. People of color have more at stake in protecting the ecosystem than anyone else. It's not a choice. Planning and cooperation aren't some kind of luxury. It's a matter of survival. Some groups are starting to use planning to support community building, and blend economic development with organizing. That's a good start. 🏠

For more information about Urban Habitat Program, its journal Race Poverty and the Environment, or its study of development in the Bay Area, call 415-561-3333 or find them on the internet at: www.igc.apc.org/uhp.



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